

State Budget Must Be Honest, Straightforward and Responsible

We must be responsible with our people's money. Mississippians deserve and demand that of their state leaders. Last year the legislature overextended and gambled with our budget. I am not willing to gamble with our people's dollars and with our children's education.

We cannot have an honest, straightforward, fiscally sound budget unless we start out with an honest figure. If we don't stop now and correct the baseline figure for this year's budget, we will start with next year's budget \$85 million in the hole.

The legislative leadership is also being irresponsible to believe that Mississippi's sales revenue will grow at a 3.7% rate for fiscal year 2002. This year, our state's revenue growth is less than 1%. So why would we budget for next year at 3.7% when our state's growth rate is flat? That is irresponsible budgeting.

If we allow the legislature to use inflated figures to budget for the upcoming fiscal year, imagine the additional amount of money we will have to cut from our agencies, colleges and universities, and schools next year. We will be building a budget on quicksand. What is now a budget problem will escalate into a budget crisis.

We are urging the legislature to lower the estimated rate of revenue growth from 3.7% to 1%, now. It is the height of irresponsibility to make a budget proposal based on rates that are higher than what we are actually growing and higher than our economic team projects we will grow. It is misleading to our agencies, misleading to our schools, misleading to our colleges and universities, and most importantly, misleading to our people. We should be honest with our people and make the adjustment that bases our rate of growth on a real number.

Mississippi is experiencing a slowdown in our economy. Our rate of growth, along with half of the states in the nation, is sluggish. Every time you pick up the paper or watch the news, there are reports of companies cutting jobs and company cutbacks. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan says the national economy is almost at a standstill. Do we really think Mississippi's economy will outpace the nation's economic growth?

We must take a realistic and conservative approach. Senate Appropriations Chair Jack Gordon is acting irresponsibly and will single-handedly take us back to the fiscal carelessness, which took place during the Mabus administration if he is not stopped. That is why I will veto every general fund appropriation bill until we restore credibility and common sense to Mississippi's budget.

If we budget responsibly, we are allowing the legislature to prioritize where we spend our money next year. We can and will make the people's priorities our priorities, and our number one priority must be education. It is vital that we make education our priority

and spend accordingly. We have suggested using AMS funds to help our community/junior colleges and universities bridge the gap in the shortfall for fiscal year 2002 and help stabilize their budgets. We are open to other solutions and want to work together with the legislature to find a solution that works.

A strong education is vital to all future successes for the people of the state. It is the cornerstone from which we build success in economic development, healthcare and other areas that have a direct impact on the quality of life of our people. When we take a responsible, honest approach to our budget, we can meet the needs of our people.